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HD **The world's on fire but do try to chill out**
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More and more of us are succumbing to eco-anxiety, says Dave Fawbert, but we all need to keep some perspective

Do you lie awake at night with a crushing sense of foreboding? Do you have a feeling of hopelessness about your future and the future of the planet? You could be suffering from "eco-anxiety" a loosely defined but widely accepted term described by the American Psychological Association as "a chronic fear of environmental doom".

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If so, you are not alone. A study in September by Bath University found that nearly 60 per cent of young people were very worried or extremely worried about climate change. Four in ten said they were hesitant to have children. These "baby doomers" say they are worried not only by the environmental impact children might have but also fear the world they would be born into. No wonder parents are getting letters home from head teachers advising on how to help their children with eco-anxiety.

It's not just young people who are suffering. A study by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy last month found that climate anxiety has had a negative effect on the mental health of 55 per cent of people of all ages.

Greta Thunberg, the 18-year-old climate heroine, has hardly helped us keep calm. As she told us in 2018: "Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people to give them hope. But I don't want your hope, I don't want you to be hopeful, I want you to panic."

But if there's no hope, what will spur anyone into taking action? Even the arch-optimist Boris Johnson said that humanity was "5-1 down at half time" against climate change. You don't tend to win when you're 5-1 down, so is there any point even trying?

Well, there is a point and there is science to back this up. The report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published in August was described by António Guterres, the UN secretary-general, as nothing less than "code red for humanity" but it also states that if we can cut global emissions in half by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050, we could stop or even reverse the rise in temperatures.

Most climate models are based on the worst-case scenario of humans not making an effort or innovating but we are doing both those things.

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"Climate anxiety is not clinical, it's a completely normal response to what is a huge series of threats," says

Linda Aspey, a counsellor who works with the Climate

Psychology Alliance, which aims to help people "face difficult truths" about climate change. In fact, if you don't have some eco-anxiety, you're probably in denial.

"It's not the planned future we thought we had," she says. "The world feels different and dangerous and scary on an almost permanent basis at the moment. So no wonder people start to say, 'Well, I've got so much to deal with, it's just too big ...' These are understandable psychological defences."

Alice Bell, a co-director of the optimistically titled climate charity Possible, agrees we face a problem. "We've got to be careful of language that gives us an endpoint," she says. "Climate change isn't a cliff that you fall off, it's a slope that you slide down. The positive side of that is there is still always so much that you can do."

She praises Thunberg for changing tack last week when she said: "It's never too late to do as much as we can." Bell says: "There is always still something you can do and something that you can save."

Louise Edgington is an educational psychologist working with schools in west London, providing free ecoanxiety workshops, webinars and resources for teachers and parents with children aged 11 to 18.

"We need to be thinking more about helping children develop the flexibility to respond to whatever's going to happen in the future," she says. "We're always talking to children about 'What career do you want to do, and how are you going to make loads of money?' But they should be trained with the human skills critical thinking, reasoning or creativity they'll need. Children of the future are going to have to be educated in a different way, in order that our societies will be more resilient."

What steps can we take now to ease the stress? "If you need to stand in the street and scream, you should probably let yourself do that," says Bell. "Climate change is bad, and we can't really solve climate change. But we can take action to stop it from hurting too many people too hard. And we can limit its impact quite a lot."

She adds: "Start with [a change] that resonates with you. You might be able to cut down on flying, cut down on meat, not have a car. But also push for political change, and social, larger cultural change that's going to make those choices easier for everyone. It'll be easier for more of us to stop flying if, for example, we have better rail infrastructure and the government subsidised rail rather than domestic flights. The best antidote to despair is action."

Aspey advises against "doom scrolling". There is no need to read every depressing headline, she says. "The best thing you can do, with help and support, is engage with it. Find the people you can talk to about it and work out what you can do. There's so much you can do to educate others, educate yourself, but without getting completely overwhelmed."

Bell points out there are grounds for hope. "If we do all we need to do in this crucial decade, then children that are born in the future may find that they are not spending all of their lives worrying about climate change," she says.

"Anyone who is alive today is going to probably live through some painful bits, but in a decade or so we could be talking about people living their lives reasonably free from the threat of it, even if that threat is still there."

We could yet stop or even reverse the rise in temperature

CO apsya : American Psychological Association | brcpsy : British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy | unbath : University of Bath

NS genv : Natural Environment | gcat : Political/General News

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